

FOUR MEN & A Baby: CHRISTMAS AND THE Gospels LUKE 1.67-79

This is the the season of the year which has becomd, for most of us, themost special season of all – when we set aside a day to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

We all know the story and can tell it without and promptings, but how much of what we know is actually the truth as revealed in God's word?

There are four gospel stories in the NT. All of the men who wrote these gospel stories lived in relatively close proximity to one another and shared common acquaintances. So you wonder why they did not get together to compare notes.

Matthew and John were both disciples of Jesus, yet their narratives are so distinctly different that they could almost be telling stories of different individuals.

Neither Mark nor Luke were among the disciples of Jesus and it is fairly certain that Luke never saw Jesus or heard him preach.

What Mark knew first-hand of Jesus would depend on who this person is who wrote the second gospel.

By most commentators, he is assumed to be the same Mark who was a relative of Barnabas and who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. For some undisclosed reason, Mark abandoned the journey.

Later, Paul refused to allow Mark to travel with him on a second journey – a decision which caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas so that they were no longer able to work together in missions activities – at least as far as the Bible record tells us.

Mark must have matured in the ministry and have become a much more reliable companion, because later, Paul welcomed him back as part of the work that he was leading.

Mark's mother, Mary, sister of Barnabas, owned a house in Jerusalem that seemed to be a central gathering place for the apostles and the early disciples. Think of the stories and testimonies that Mark would have been privileged to hear in such an environment.

Others believe that the logistics prevent the gospel writer from being this same Mark who was a companion of Paul. But this conflict of opinion has no real bearing on the message this morning.

The one thing that virtually every biblical scholar does agree on is that the Apostle Peter was directly instrumental in the conversion of Mark. This is based primarily on a reference in **1 Peter 5.13** where Peter refers to Mark as his son.

Apparently, Mark became a disciple of Peter and joined him in his travels.

He is referred to as "the interpreter of Peter" and that he wrote his Gospel "under the eye of Peter" and with Peter's approval (Barnes). Therefore, the story told by Mark is actually greatly influence by the testimony of Peter, so that, in fact, three of the gospel stories originated from the experiences of apostles.

Mark's purpose in writing was not to prove the lineage of Jesus or His right to the throne of David, as was Matthew's intent, nor simply to give an historical account of the life of Christ, as was one of Luke's primary goals.

Mark's primary purpose was to write concerning the service of Christ for the sake of the redeemed, and thus he begins his gospel with a short introduction of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of OT prophecy, followed by the baptism of Jesus, and His temptation by Satan in the wilderness.

Thus, by **verse 14** of the **first chapter of Mark**, we see Jesus full grown – already engaged in preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Mark continues to show us Jesus actively involved in calling, teaching, healing, casting out demons, ministering, praying, and cleansing a leper – all of this within just the first chapter!

For Mark, there was no need for a Christmas story. He was more intent on the mission story – the message of the kingdom of God having come to man to restore him to the Father. It is the story, not just of Christmas itself, but of the gift of Christmas – the person, and the service, and the sacrifice of Jesus.

There is also implied in the gospel writing of Mark a wonderful example of what it means to make disciples. Remember that ***“after all is finished, a student will be like his teacher.”***

While Mark was neither a hearer nor a follower of Jesus, he **was** a follower of Peter. Peter taught Mark the stories and the meaning of the life and the service of Jesus with such effectiveness that Mark was able to transcribe them as if it were Peter writing himself, for the story is told from the point of view of an eye-witness.

Although Mark's gospel was the first to be written, Mark most likely never met Jesus or heard Him preach or witnessed His miracles, His crucifixion, or His resurrection.

John, on the other hand, – who wrote the last of the four gospels – is referred to as “the beloved disciple.” He was among the first to follow Jesus and became part of what seemed to have been an inner circle of disciples with whom Jesus spent a great deal of His time.

As far as the biblical record goes, John was the only one of the twelve disciples to witness the crucifixion of Jesus.

Not only did John spend three years in the presence of Jesus, he was one of only three disciples who were privileged to witness the transfiguration of Christ, when Jesus was clothed in a brilliant light, to witness Jesus standing in the presence of Elijah and Moses, and to hear the voice of God speak, “This is my beloved Son: hear him.”

You can read about this wonderful experience in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – none of whom were witnesses to the event. Apparently, the Holy Spirit did not inspire John to record the experience.

Neither did the Holy Spirit inspire John to tell anything about the birth of Jesus. John wrote his gospel near the end of his life,

which meant sometime near the end of the first century after all other witnesses were dead and gone.

It may very well be that John had read the earlier accounts of the birth of Jesus written by Matthew and Luke and felt there was no need for any further writing on the subject – a fact which seems to confirm the accuracy of the two accounts, even though many critics today feel that the stories conflict and contradict each other.

Yet John did deal with origins. The difference is that John goes back in time far beyond Bethlehem – even past the Creation – to reveal the true beginning of Christ in the fellowship of the Trinity in eternity – before there was ever time, space, or matter.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.

Those opening verses set the theme for a gospel that differs from the other three with its emphasis on the deity of Christ and the message of what it means to be “born again.”

For John, the message of Christmas is not about a nativity scene, but it is about the life that comes to those who believe in the name of Jesus, as he himself explained in ***John 20.31.***

For John the message is about the love of Christ for His followers – a theme that John writes more of in his epistles of ***1st, 2nd, and 3rd John.***

For John, the message of Christmas is not so much about the mission of Jesus, but about the man who was Christ – of His person and His majesty and His glory – a message that John elaborated on in great detail in his final book, The Revelation of Christ.

So there is nothing about the birth of Jesus to be learned from either Mark or John. We must, then, rely on Matthew and Luke for the truth concerning the Christmas story.

Yet even these stories are told from widely varying perspectives.

They are so different, in fact, that many critics have concluded that they are mythological narratives because of their seeming contradictions.

Yet one wonders why these critics find it necessary to identify the variations in a story as contradictions? Two perspectives on the same story do not make the stories contradictory. To understand why the stories are so different only requires an understanding of the purposes of the authors.

Matthew, for example, is writing mainly to the Jews. The theme of his gospel is the “kingdom of heaven,” a phrase he uses 55 times – twelve times in **Chapter 13** alone – often referred to as the “kingdom chapter.”

Luke is writing to a single individual named Theophilus for the purpose of setting the record straight. With tenacity and attention to detail, Luke sets out to write a complete story of the life of Jesus and writes from the point of view of a Greek historian, of which his gospel is only Volume 1. Volume 2 is the book of Acts.

The two authors do agree on some aspects of the story:

- Mother – Mary, a virgin
- Father – Joseph
- Conceived by divine intervention
- Born in Bethlehem
- His name is Jesus

After that, things are much different.

Remember that Matthew’s theme is the kingdom of heaven, so he begins his gospel with a genealogy, connecting Jesus to His Jewish history as well as His messianic lineage.

He follows this up with the story of the visit of the *Magi* – although he never makes any reference to how many wise men there were. These men traveled from the east searching for the King of the Jews and, once they found Him, they gave to the baby Jesus gifts worthy of a king – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

On the other hand, Luke is all about the long journey to Bethlehem, the shepherds and the sheep, and the manger and

the rough conditions under which the child is born, and makes no reference to a visit by the wise men.

Only Matthew tells about the slaughter of the innocents by Herod following the visit of the wise men, and of Joseph’s flight with his family into Egypt and of their subsequent return and the decision to settle in Nazareth.

Only Luke goes into the details surrounding the birth of John the Baptist.

In Matthew, God revealed His plans to Joseph by way of an unnamed angel in the midst of dreams.

In Luke, the angel is named Gabriel, and he reveals the will of God to Zacharias and to Mary.

In Matthew, the main character of the narrative is Joseph, while in Luke, the central character is Mary

In light of his theme of the sovereignty of Christ, Matthew repeatedly makes references to the fulfillment of OT prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah.

- The virgin birth fulfilled **Isaiah 7.14**
- The birth in Bethlehem fulfilled **Micah 5.2**
- The flight to Egypt by Joseph and his family fulfilled **Numbers 24.8**
- Their move to Nazareth fulfilled OT prophecies concerning His rejection and the contempt with which He would be treated by His own people

While Matthew’s narrative makes mention of the role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Jesus, He is a major player in Luke’s version of the story.

- 1.15** John the Baptist is filled with the HG from conception
- 1.35** The child Mary conceived was from the HG
- 1.41** Elizabeth was filled with the HG as Mary entered
- 1.67** Zacharias was filled w/ the HG and began to prophesy
- 2.25** HG revealed to Simeon that the baby was the Messiah

If you remember from our study of the book of Acts, the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church is a continuing theme, but it did not begin at Pentecost. His influence is realized throughout the gospel story from the conception of the baby Jesus through the carrying of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Over the centuries, men have taken all the sources of information concerning the birth of Jesus – from Matthew and Luke and the carols of Christmas – and woven them into one narrative. We have shepherds following a star to the manger, and, in many cases, a manger scene will have three shepherds, most likely an influence of the story of the Wise Men.

In the process, maybe we've allowed our perspective to become a bit skewed out of proportion so that we see only the peace of the manger and fail to comprehend the shadow of the cross that looms above it.

Just as we have allowed the Christmas story to become a tangle of fact and fancy, we have allowed the gospel message to become entangled with our traditions and doctrines until the baby in the manger and the Savior on the cross are little more than decorations amidst the glitter of our holidays, obscuring to our culture and to our children the enormous gift of grace that they represent.

One other aspect of the Christmas story as it is told by Luke are the original Christmas carols.

I am not referring to the one that the angels sang to the shepherds of "Peace on earth, goodwill to men." In fact, the Bible never says that the angels sang or that they were hovering over the shepherds' heads.

I am talking about the two hymns recorded in **Chapter 1** of Luke.

- Magnificat of Mary, **Luke 1.46-55**
- Prophecy of Zacharias, **Luke 1.67-79**

While the Bible does not say that Zacharias sang, I can't help but believe the Holy Spirit in his heart led him to an exaltation that was worthy of being listed with the Psalms.

Luke 1.67-79 (NLT)

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant – the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.

"And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace."

This should be our prayer this morning, especially **verses 74 and 77**:

We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. (We) will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.